Kodwo Eshun

VISIONS OF RHYTHM IN THE KINEMATIC PNEUMACOSM OF HYPE WILLIAMS

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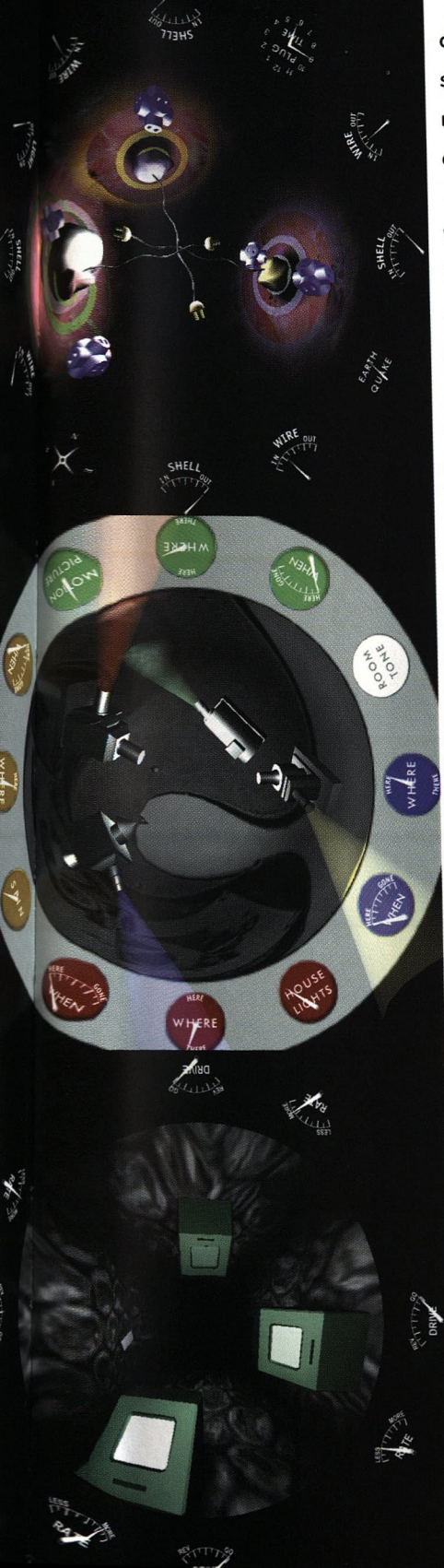
Today, the music video, as the digital theorist Lev Manovich persuasively argues, functions as "a laboratory for exploring the new possibilities" of digital cinema.[1] New slownesses, new speeds, new fermatas, new polyrhythms, new dynamic events emerge from the elastic reality and softimages of broadcast entertainment culture.

Back in 1979, the Parliament-Funkadelic producer George Clinton linked audio, vision and movement, the components of entertainment culture, together into a single sleek equation – the rhythm of *vision is a dancer*.[2] This proposition allows us to analyze the post-1994 music video as the digital convergence of these intensities.

More precisely, we can hear and see how the processes of choreography and editing, effect processing and digital music fuse in the modern hip-hop and R&B video to become a new "animatography" – film director Dario Argento's 1971 term for a future cinema of animated photography.[3]

The music video is to the musical as the break is to the funk track: the concentrated essence of the digital image. It's all effect, nothing but special efx double plus. A slice



of time that enthralls and appalls in rapid succession. Nothing dates faster than the music video – and this is its value – to time-code the present as cultural fantasy.

We know that all digital music is out of date because today's music is partly made from samples constructed on the spot, partly from samples snatched from their dates, effects separated from their causes, sound-events looped from phonographic pasts which they drag along nonetheless. Times are sliced from their calendars, scrambling the inherited calendar of musical history, anachronizing traditions, rearranging legacies.

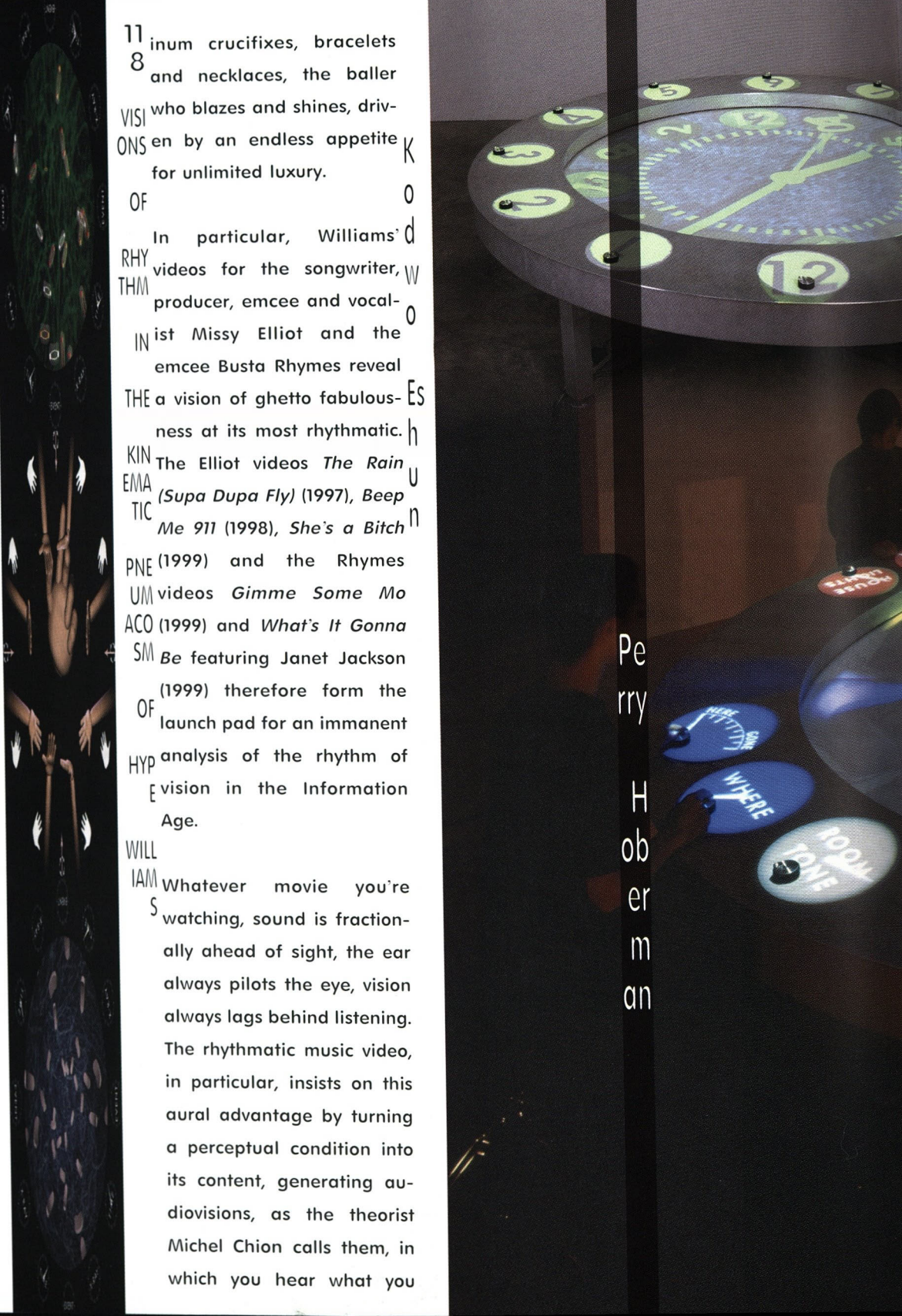
Since 1994, the video director Hype Williams has drastically reinvented the look of hip hop and R&B. In grandiose presidential epics (Puff Daddy's *Victory*), Messiah identifying playa fantasies (Nas' *Hate Me Now*), Buddhamorphic Mariko Moriesque homages (TLC's *Unpretty*), seething R&B grrrl rage (Kelis' *Caught Out There*) and lascivious uptown hymns to booty (Q-Tip's *Vivrant Thing*), Williams breaks decisively with hip-hop's territorial allegiance to the street.

In its place, he projects an aesthetic of ghetto fabulousness, a term invented by the Bad Boy record label CEO, producer and plutocrat Sean "Puffy" Combs. As a worldview, ghetto fabulousness epitomizes an early 2000s mindstate of hypercapitalist realism, replacing the mid-1990s ideal of the heavy-lidded gangsta with the archetype of the playa, weighted with "ice," plat-

inum crucifixes, bracelets and necklaces, the baller who blazes and shines, driven by an endless appetite for unlimited luxury.

In particular, Williams' videos for the songwriter, producer, emcee and vocalist Missy Elliot and the emcee Busta Rhymes reveal a vision of ghetto fabulousness at its most rhythmatic. The Elliot videos *The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)* (1997), *Beep Me 911* (1998), *She's a Bitch* (1999) and the Rhymes videos *Gimme Some Mo* (1999) and *What's It Gonna Be* featuring Janet Jackson (1999) therefore form the launch pad for an immanent analysis of the rhythm of vision in the Information Age.

Whatever movie you're watching, sound is fractionally ahead of sight, the ear always pilots the eye, vision always lags behind listening. The rhythmatic music video, in particular, insists on this aural advantage by turning a perceptual condition into its content, generating audiovisions, as the theorist Michel Chion calls them, in which you hear what you



PICTURE
WHERE

want to watch rather than vice versa.[4]

VISIONS OF RHYTHM IN THE KINEMATIC

Every music video visualizes its songworld; the modern dance video opens up another dimension by extending the kinematic, the field of movement, into the sonic, so that the image becomes "kinesonic," in Drew Hemment's term.[5] To understand William's kinesonic visions of computerhythm, it's necessary to understand his key videos as a trilaboration with Melissa Elliot who contributes the persona Missy Misdemeanour and the influential R&B producer Tim "Timbaland" Mosley, with whom Elliot cowrites tracks.

PNEUMACOSM OF HYPE WILLIAMS

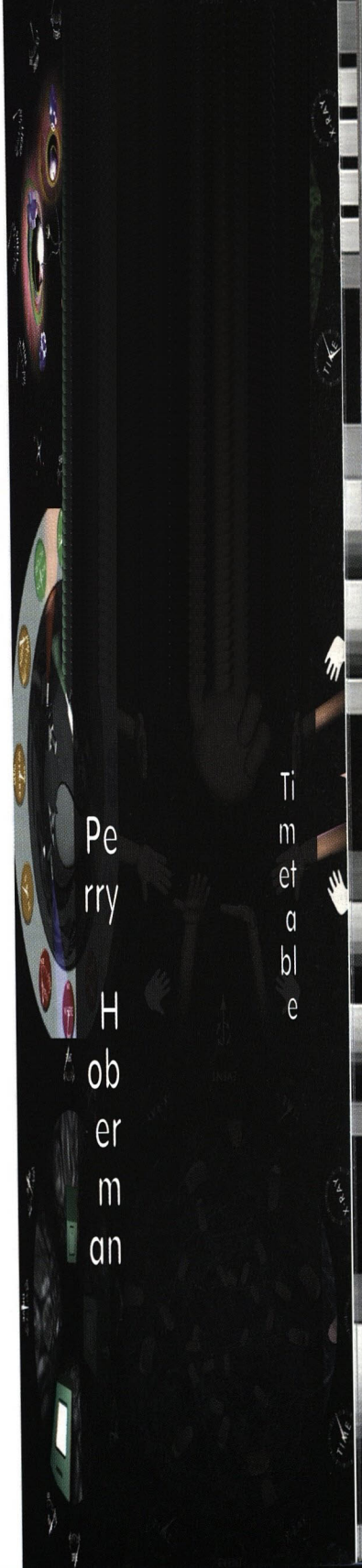
Born from the merger of Brownian discipline with Kraftwerkian stiffness, funk is where the human and the machine meet and part exchange, a discontinuum between the organic and the mekanik, the rigidly human and the softly machinic. Back in 1996, Timbaland hyped the funk with his signature sound, an ultra-electronic hypersyncopation that reprogrammed R&B overnight, setting off repercussions throughout the late 1990s/early 2000s audioscape.

A Timbaland production such as the synthetic hypersoul of Aaliyah's *What's So Different* (2000) or Ginuine's *What's So Different* (1999) immediately arrests you with its stopstart supersyncopation. Mosley's digital age funk incited Williams' fascination with sonomotion, his vision of the digital image libidinized as pulsation and frequency.

To assemble the landscape of synthetic percussion, that is, the syncussionscape of *The Rain*, Timbaland sampled the title vocal and reconfigured two bars from the chorus of Ann Peebles' 1974 synthetic soul classic *I Can't Stand the Rain*. Minimal yet weirdly huge, with pauses wide enough to park a Jeep in, the synthesizer tones in *The Rain* are rhythmelodic, simultaneously rhythmic and melodic. Listening to *The Rain* – formed from bass pulse, tick-tock syncussion and ultrastark hook processed into a half Moog-half woodblock twintone – is like brain-drops falling off your head.

By artificializing R&B, *The Rain* announced a cyborg funk that allowed Williams to generate metal melodic machine worlds populated by humans modified by media. Robo steps and rotary hips: a Williams video grows a new human from the feet upwards. A Timbaland track moves with a stilted, lurching gait that Simon Reynolds terms "falterfunk." It's a series of hesitations that never fail to ambush you. Patterns are unresolved, incomplete, indefinite.

Rhythmatically speaking, it's cleverer than you or me, it's always wrongfooting you. Without warning, doorknocker snares double and triple in tempo: dot-dot-dash Morsecodes that pause, listen, then head off in another direction, bringing you up short, catching you out. Basswise, Mosley opts for spasms that sometimes double up the kickdrum sound, other times erupting suddenly from the giant spaces between the snare-steps, sliding the floor from beneath you, blindsiding you.



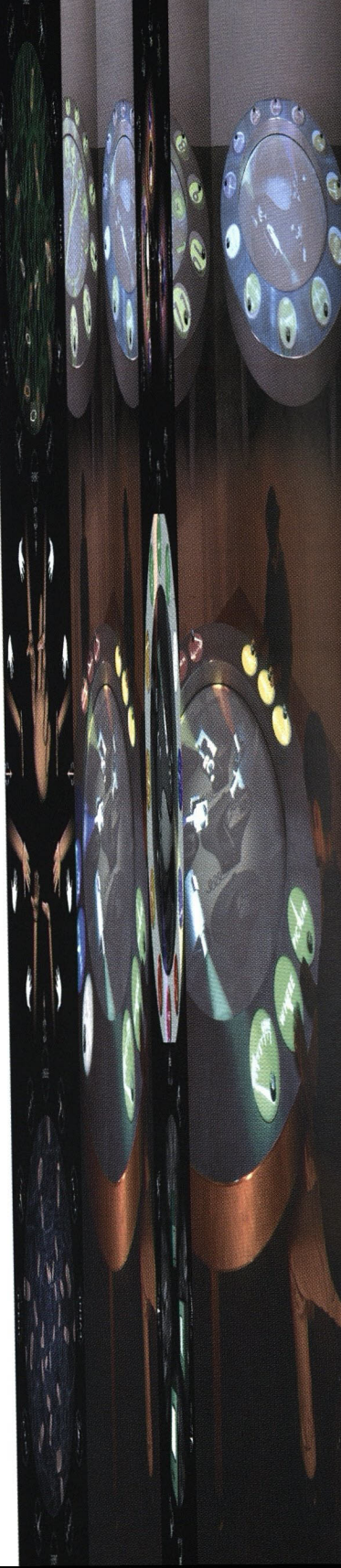
Throughout this treacherous rhythmscape, Timbaland prowls sotte voce, a creepy phono-stalker. Elliot herself doesn't flow lyrically so much as zigzag in a precise cadence, poised between emceeing and singing. Her sprechgesgange leaves space for what the composer Toru Takemitsu calls "vocalism," an indelible onomatopoetry of vrrrrooms, beep beeps, uggghs, heees and brrrrrrs.

Elliot is what the drum 'n' bass producer Pascal calls a mind-stresser. She specializes in stressing the odd syllables in a word, pausing at the hinge points of syntax, then stre-e-e-tching the ending until the word topples off the beat into space. By accenting unanticipated syllables, she stretches and dilates space until syntax projects dynamically, trading with space, punch phrasing with the beats. All hip hop does this; Elliot does it asymmetrically.

Taken together, Elliot's cadence and Timbaland's programming mutually reinforce a new pattern of inhalation/exhalation. In their world, you're reprogrammed from the lungs inward, invited and incited to breathe and stop, as Q-Tip commands in a circulatory pattern that's both fluid and rigid, liquid and abrupt, stiff and loose.[6] These paradoxical patterns form the biomechanical diagram for funkatized computer music. They are a schematic of the twin illogic of today's modern dance.

In lyrically regressive, rhythmically advanced dance musics like R&B, Southern bounce and two-step garage, harmony and melody have fused to become harmelodies, texture and rhythm to become texturhythms. As cultural expression, music video choreography is ignored if not reviled as the nadir of ultrasexism, as a dead end of complaisant video-hos gyrating and lounging by gigantic swimming pools. If choreography is ever noticed, it's to disparage it as the epitome of uncreative corniness.

As Klaus Theweleit suggested, the dance medium "always displays the conscious cultivation of new images of the



body."[7] A closer look at choreography in Williams' videos suggests that it functions as a medium within the video medium, not only for visualizing rhythms as human patterns, which is obvious enough, but for translating advanced polyrhythmic events into human ornaments. Not mass ornaments in the sense of the stadium gymnastic displays that Siegfried Kracauer noted in the 1920s. Nor quite the kaleidoscopic patterns of rhythm Busby Berkeley orchestrated on celluloid at the same time.

Rather, it elaborates special effects as cultural fantasies, delivering you comfortably into the moving vehicle of the impossible image. When digitally edited syncopation is translated into digital movement that is translated as human movement and then digitally reedited as unrealtime dance, an "artificial realism," in photographer Jeff Walls' term, ensues – a smooth delusion that happily blurs the distinctions between the organic and the computational, soft machine times and flexible carbon tempos.

The Hype Williams universe flaunts these qualities because it's a syncopescape, a five-minute hypersyncopated landscape in which everything has rhythmelodic properties: the camera angles and the optical filters, the lighting and the set design, the surfaces and the finishes, the costumes and the makeup, the limbs, the faces, the gestures, the expressions. In this world, hypersyncopation isn't so much illustrated as it is orchestrated. It assumes the capabilities of a motive force by animating an abbreviated world peopled by polyrhythmaddicts, worlds in which everyone and everything is in thrall to the dynamics of the digital.

The synchronization of syncopation is the motor of the dance music video. Look closely at *The Rain* and it's audibly clear that a twitch is a beat, a shrug is a kick and a nod is as good as a wink. Choreography, effects processing and musculature all fuse in an angular fluidity. Elliot's movements, all sudden twitches, abrupt lunges and insectoid pulses, update the early-1980s style of tic toc bodypopping, the dance which

animated the analogue motion of first wave electro.

Syncussion depersonalizes Elliot and her girl dancers, trapped in the doll's house of *Beep Me 911*, into woman-droids with hinged joints, in the grip of invisible forces greater than them. Their gestures – lower arms held at right angles, dipping from the shoulder, stiff-legged gait, inflexible turns – stage the rigidly robotic mindstate and bitter mood of the song's worldview.

Beep Me 911 syncopates and abbreviates the long line of geometric females from the Metropolis robot to Marie 1 and Marie 2 in Vera Chytilova's eerie 1966 movie *Daisies* to the 1970s of Bryan Forbes' *Stepford Wives*. Missy's girls join in a ballet rhythmechanique, rigidly embodying what Antonin Artaud recognized as the gestural music of "a falling foot, an arching knee, a constant play of mirrors where human limbs seem to echo one another."[8]

Welding the vocal science of the sampler to the editing/effect processing of the work station, the dance music video orchestrates a microphysics of gesture, a labyrinth of vocalization. *The Rain* demonstrates Elliot's zygomatic muscles becoming a facioplastic fantasy in time, a vision of on-beat rhythm. Her eyes do one thing while her mouth does another. When she leans into the camera her lips swell and quiver in an S-wave motion.

The image slows down to the weightless tempo of a glide-by shooting.[9] As she leans to the left, her eyes look right and bulge, slide sideways, look up from beneath her fake fringe as her lips struggle to suppress a laugh. In the electronic world of *The Rain*, she regresses to an artificial girlhood. On top of the hill "like Lauren," she smooths her wig, shakes it in her face, wipes it away, bats her eyelashes Diana-style.

Sunglasses inflate and mold the eyes into bugged orbs. From The Fly in *Car Wash* to Sly Stone, from Stevie Wonder to Miles Davis to Kool Keith, you could write a monograph on the

shades in postwar African-American electronic music. As the *Supa Dupa Fly*, the personification of the song, its presiding demon, Elliot drastically reinvents this male tradition of looking fly while buggin' out.

Her eyewear fuses shades with helmets, headpieces with goggles, emphasizes finish and exaggerates frame into Technic 1200 toned tough reflective skins that wrap the spaces between cheekbone, nose and forehead. Concaved by Williams' goldfisheye lens, Missy becomes ultra-fly. Facing Puffy Combs, she tilts and cocks her head, reticulating rhythmic movement with an exaggerated alertness. Pam, the singer from Total, the Missy-produced girl trio, leans forward in a lazy curve. Her tongue, lengthy as a gecko, lolls out and slurps the air. In *No Scrubs* (1999) the cybER&B girl trio TLC become armbumpered, kneepadded, wallcrawling chameleons nimbly scaling the paneled surfaces of their platinum tubeways.

"On either side of a characteristic synch point," Michel Chion explains, "the capacity for temporal elasticity can become almost infinite ... hooking auditory continuity to visual continuity is what allows the time around it to swell, fold, puff up, tighten, stretch or on the contrary hang loosely like fabric."[10] Chion was pondering the dynamic edits of martial arts movies when he wrote this, but it fits the Williams aesthetic like a velvet glove. The parallels between the on-point slash and scythe of martial movements and the onbeat punch of breakbeats are voluble.

Maybe Missy Elliot's Michelin Woman suit in *The Rain* is so startling and so satisfying to see and feel because it translates sonic temporality into pneumatic tangibility. Glinting and gelatinous, it exaggerates the elasticity Chion hymns, crosswires sensations until you see the fabric of the song. Swathed inside her inflato suit, her limbs protrude like cats coupling in a four-cornered bag, like a starfish tussling with a telephone kiosk in a gloss black jellymold. She deflates on a steel gray plinth, softboned, head lolling, arms limp as

Digitally organized imaging

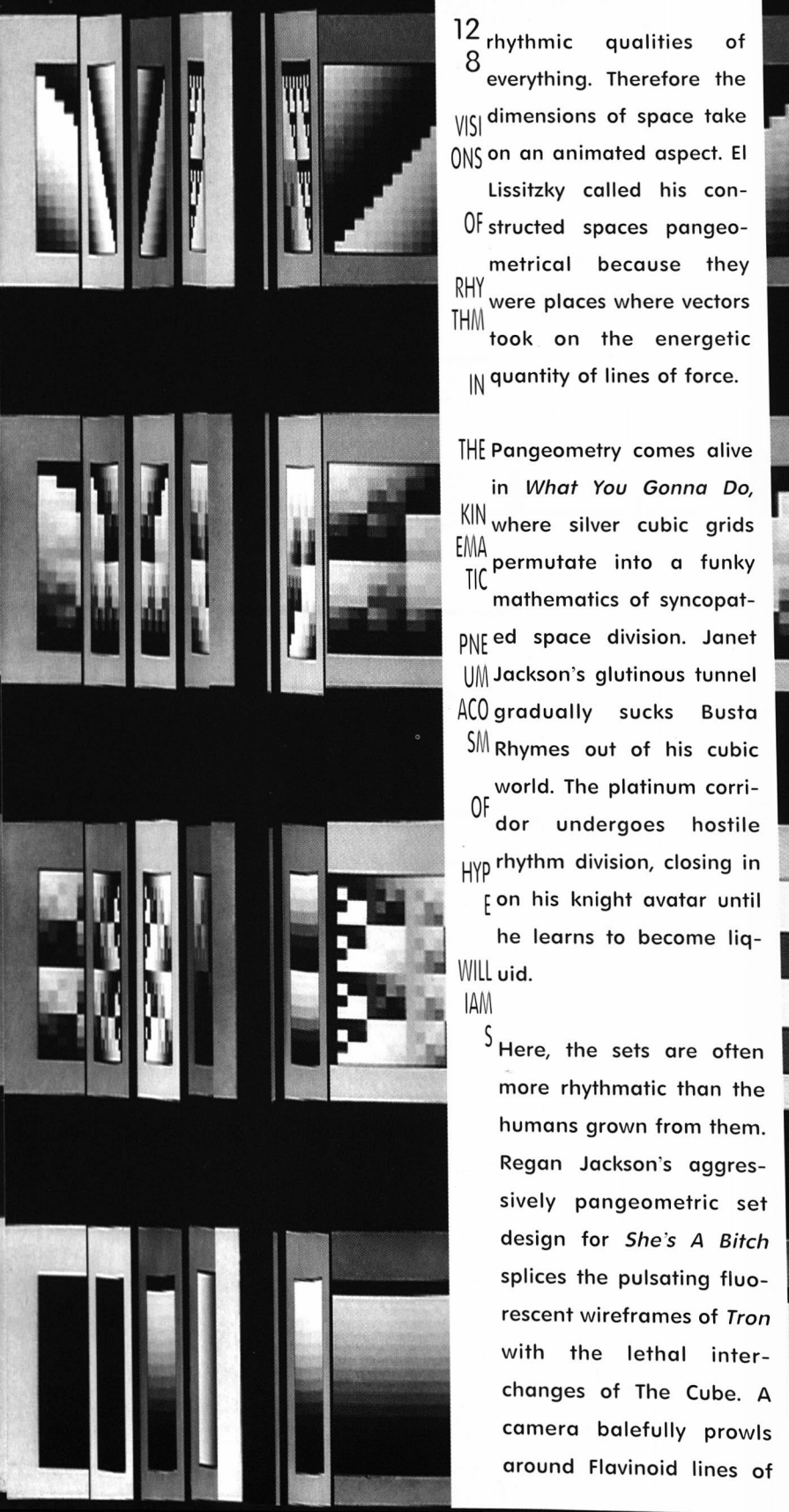
razor-edged rotor blades swinging either side of her larval state.

Lip-synching to her voice at half speed means that her mouth lags behind playback. Typically Williams fluctuates the degrees of asynchronicity to infra-thin slices of time so that Elliot's mouth sometimes runs ahead of a micropause while a syntharmonic bass lurches forward. Conversely, she visually pauses as her cadence swerves sideways and a bass suddenly halts. A net of gaps, a skein of traps connecting the visual to the mobile to the now-diverging/now-converging rhythmic, opens up the dimension of the kinesonic.

On *Gimme Some Mo,* by contrast, Busta Rhymes' flow runs on in a series of rapid-fire lunges, syntactic strikes launched for optimal informational density. Williams often freezes a scene so that Busta halts, stranded on the verge of a new word. Vision pauses for a micro-tic as audio streams on, thus creating the paradoxical impact of a moving pause and the overwhelming sense that the visual is discharging the audio, dynamizing it.

It's the visual equivalent of the DJ technique of punch phrasing, where you delay the record on beat, wait a blink, then release for a Kapow! effect. At other times in *Gimme Some Mo,* the fermata explodes into a gliding slowness until the Versace-bright avatars float momentarily untethered from gravity.

The Williams syncopescape affirms the



rhythmic qualities of everything. Therefore the dimensions of space take on an animated aspect. El Lissitzky called his constructed spaces pangeometrical because they were places where vectors took on the energetic quantity of lines of force.

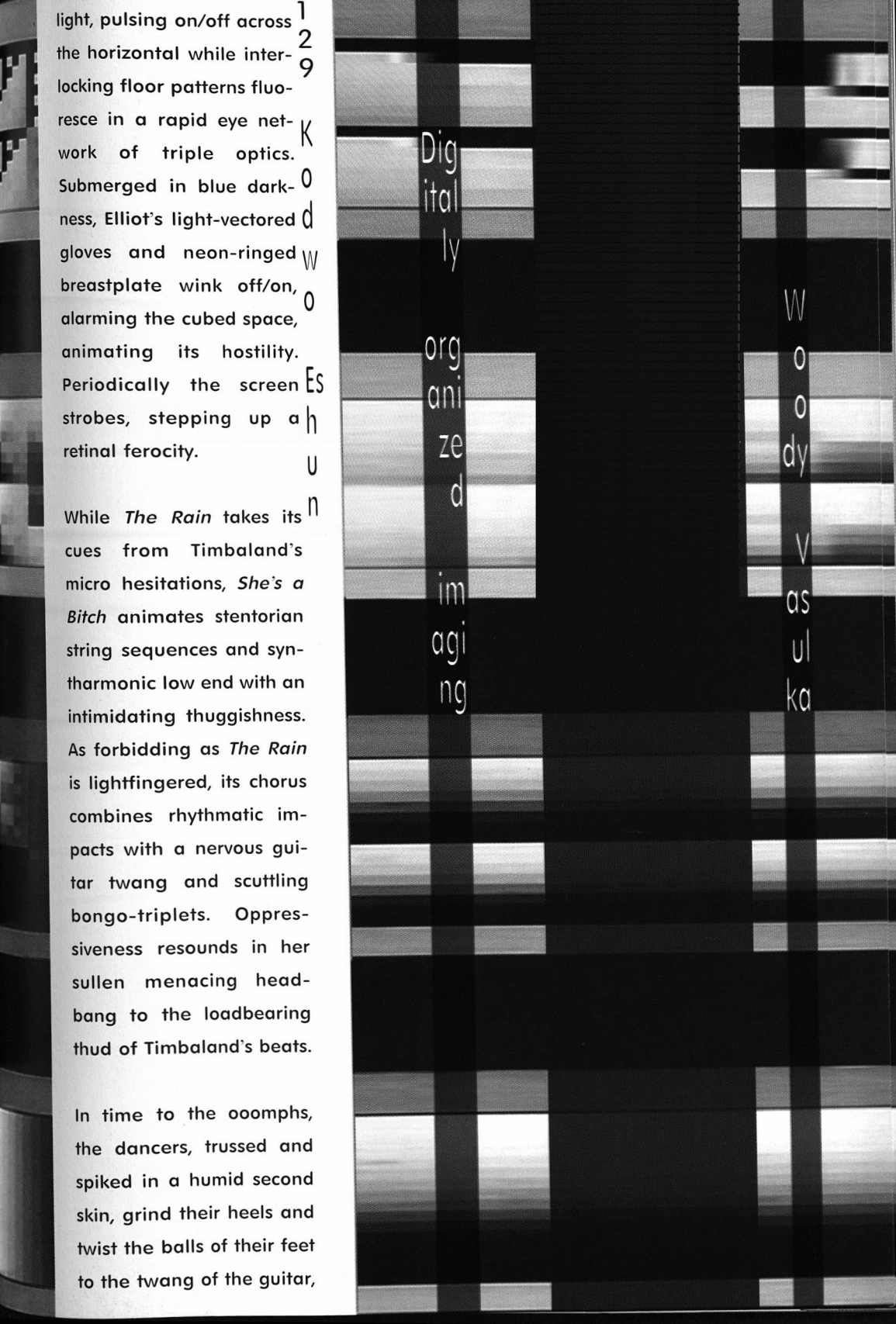
Pangeometry comes alive in *What You Gonna Do,* where silver cubic grids permutate into a funky mathematics of syncopated space division. Janet Jackson's glutinous tunnel gradually sucks Busta Rhymes out of his cubic world. The platinum corridor undergoes hostile rhythm division, closing in on his knight avatar until he learns to become liquid.

Here, the sets are often more rhythmatic than the humans grown from them. Regan Jackson's aggressively pangeometric set design for *She's A Bitch* splices the pulsating fluorescent wireframes of *Tron* with the lethal interchanges of The Cube. A camera balefully prowls around Flavinoid lines of

light, pulsing on/off across the horizontal while interlocking floor patterns fluoresce in a rapid eye network of triple optics. Submerged in blue darkness, Elliot's light-vectored gloves and neon-ringed breastplate wink off/on, alarming the cubed space, animating its hostility. Periodically the screen strobes, stepping up a retinal ferocity.

While *The Rain* takes its cues from Timbaland's micro hesitations, *She's a Bitch* animates stentorian string sequences and syntharmonic low end with an intimidating thuggishness. As forbidding as *The Rain* is lightfingered, its chorus combines rhythmatic impacts with a nervous guitar twang and scuttling bongo-triplets. Oppressiveness resounds in her sullen menacing headbang to the loadbearing thud of Timbaland's beats.

In time to the ooomphs, the dancers, trussed and spiked in a humid second skin, grind their heels and twist the balls of their feet to the twang of the guitar,



stomping on the giant island M platform. Vacuum-packed into a harnessed ultra-black exoskeleton, Missy holds her head, tilts it from left to right and twists it as if screwing it off her shoulders.

If the dance medium consciously cultivates "new images of the body," then the section of *The Rain* that shows Missy toppling and teetering suggests that she is being buffeted by the ruff ryde of a new rhythmic regime. On observing the Balinese Theatre in Paris, Artaud perceived a similar adaptation process. "They have their own way of regaining their balance" he noted, "a peculiar, arching, leg-twisting stance which gives the impression of a wet cloth about to be wrung to music." Like the Balinese, Elliot's droids are struggling to integrate a new behavior, to grow a new nervous system.

The opening scenes of *She's a Bitch* reveal Missy as a dreadnought, sailing down a black tube, black cloak unfurling silently like Darth Vader's vicious sister's. More Technics 1200 than human, her skintone is lit with silver until it emits a paradoxical black light. Retinal intensity is sucked into a vacuum and inverted until it illuminates everything as degrees of humid, indistinct black light. It's a world of service sectors and tubeways, tunnels and airlocked corridors where the distinction between walls and ceiling collapses in a continuously clad curvature.

Jackson fascination with curvature takes its cue partly from Mark Romanek's *Scream*

video for Michael Jackson, partly from Williams' colossal preference for the (gold)fisheye lens which picks up space and wraps it around his figures, enclosing them in a wide-angled aquarium from which they peer out at us. They home in on the camera, pulsating the screen, crowding and squeezing into the frame until it's on the verge of bursting, going pop. Back in 1993, De la Soul called this the Buhloone Mindstate, the sensation of a membrane swollen with desire, tangible with appetite."

As its greedy title suggests, the video for Busta Rhymes' *Gimme Some Mo* escalates this sense of a puffed-up life to monstrous extremes. Rhymes' seven-deep crew of MC allies and cronies are called the Flipmode Squad; accordingly, all events occur in the flip(ped) mode of the song's interior, a space that rotates around the royal axis of an unchanging yet endlessly listenable loop from Gus Van Sant's *Psycho* remake.

When the child Busta trips on a tree root, bumps his head and mutates into a monster boy, his alteration isn't synched so much as propelled by door-knocker snares and the adult Rhymes' terse, impatient "C'mon C'mon." Rhymes' pupils dilate, turn red, swirl and rotate. Leaning towards the maid, whose sheerly clad legs tower over him, yellow canines shoot from his lipless purple mouth. His right eye, left eye, nostrils and brow violently sproing from his face and he sprouts electric blue fur.

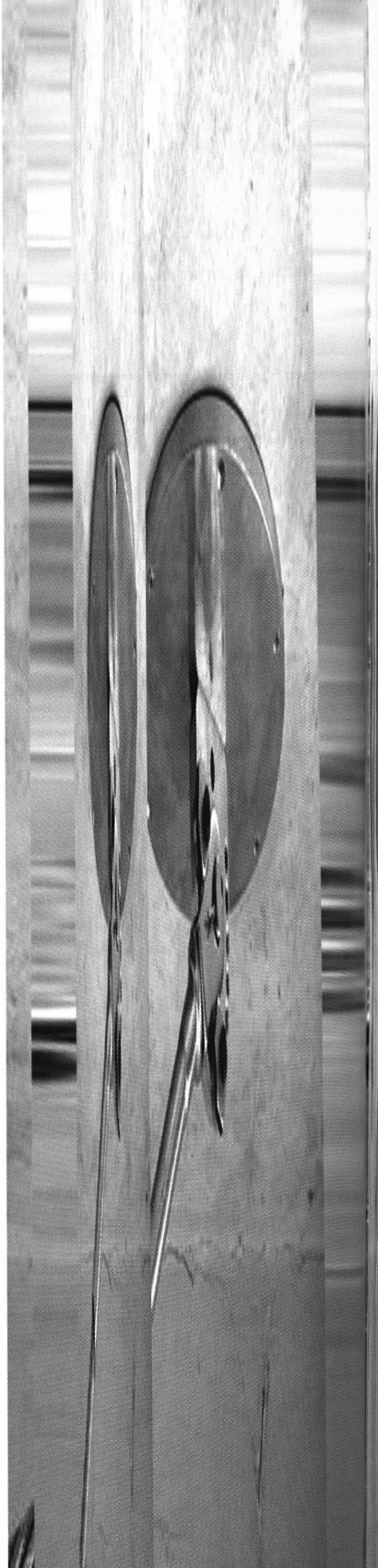
Polyrhythm incites monstrosity. It calls it out by its name. Busta, now Monsta Boy, is

Gimme Some Mo's (un)real face, the "fabulous" in ghetto-fabulous animated and amok in a world turned Pantonesque. As the maid scales the fridge to escape Monsta Boy, the camera waits for her. At the top of the fridge, her head broadens and squashes up against the frame. Her nose and mouth swell and flatten into a nostrilly, planar rhinoplasticity.

Her body is swallowed by the aggressively, exuberantly shape-changing world she inhabits. Far below, her red shoes taper into points. Space distends so Monsta Boy looking up at her from the checkered kitchen floor is banished to the vanishing point.

Busta as a swaggering cop, his elbow making a musical angle with its forearm, Busta in a blue zoot suit, Busta tied to a railway line, Busta in a lime-green suit splined along the curvature between wall and ceiling, Busta with a droopy moustache and sombrero, Busta as a flashwad tycoon shaking dead presidents at you, Busta obscured by high-beam goggles, Busta in a pink snakeskin top with hooped rings at the upper arms, Busta suitalooned in an inflatomuscular skin, Busta draped in a luxurious chinchilla coat that heedlessly sweeps the floor: Busta has selves to go.

Gimme Some Mo exemplifies ghettofabulousness in its perpetual parade of luxurious mutation fired up by continuous appetite. *Gimme Some Mo* is Hype Williams in excelsis.



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More Brilliant Than The Sun, his first book on sonic fiction, the interface between science fiction and electronic music was published in May 1998 by Quartet Books. Here he assembles an entirely new field of study which he terms sonic fiction: the intersection between science fiction and sound. Kodwo Eshun dismantles the mechanics of the "futurhythmachine" – the co-evolution of humans and machines.